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AUTHOR Burpee, Peter; Wilson, Brenda
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ABSTRACT

This report describes the development of a distance education, professional development program for teacher education which promotes two-way communication between tutor and student through use of the telephone, electronic mail, and facsimile transmission (FAX). It is reported that in 1986, McGill University in Montreal began by offering education courses to five teachers in remote areas, with enrollment expanding to 320 by 1991. Educational computing and media courses were adapted for distance education, representing the department's first major venture in developing specific instructional materials for distance learners. Additionally, the geographical area served grew to include all of Quebec, the Northwest Territories, the Yukon, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and parts of Newfoundland and Labrador. It is noted that, although the relationship between teacher and student in distance education seems to imply a form of learning that is remote, impersonal, and indifferent, students of the McGill program praise the courses for their "human" atmosphere and the "warm" interaction they allow. It is concluded that the McGill University program is a success, and will continue to establish more substantial programs in continuing education for professionals. It is also expected that future research will find immediate application in establishing new guidelines for tutor training. (13 references) (DB)

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Distance Education in the Faculty of Education

by

Peter Burpee

and

Brenda Wilson

Faculty of Education, McGill University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

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Distance Education in the Faculty of Education

Peter Burpee and Brenda Wilson

Abstract

Now in its fourth year, with numbers which have grown from five to 320 students, McGill's rapidly expanding distance program offers professional development courses for teachers. Its innovative element lies in promoting two-way communication between tutor and student through the use of telephone, electronic mail and fax.

"Distance education," seems to imply through its very name a form of learning that is remote, impersonal and indifferent, but it is in fact the exact opposite. The popular professional courses for teachers offered in McGill's Distance Education program are praised by participants for their unusually "human" atmosphere and the "warm" interaction which they allow. Many students feel that they have never had so close a relationship with a professor who supports their learning on an individual basis. One student commented, "I give my tutor most of the credit for the success of the course. He was always there to help when problems arose," Another wrote, "Electronic mail made the course seem one-to-one. I felt the tutor was mine personally." (Burpee, Wilson, 1988 / 89 / 90).

The innovative elements of the McGill program include the use of electronic mail and fax as well as telephone and postal services. In the discussion that follows we will look at the concept of distance education and the development of our program in a Canadian and international context. We will explore the paradox that studying "at a distance" can often become an intensely personal and highly rewarding form of learner-centred education.

One definition of distance education

Distance education as a method of teaching and learning is a relatively recent pedagogical term. Keegan (1990a), in reviewing contributions made over several years, puts forward the following definition:

> Distance education is a form of education characterized by:
> - the quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process
> - the influence of an educational organization both in the planning and preparation of learning materials and in the provision of student support services;
> - the use of technical media - print, audio, video or computer - to unite the teacher and learner and carry on the content of the course;
> - the provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue; and
> - the quasi-permanent absence of the learning group throughout the length of the learning process so that people are usually taught as individuals and not in groups, with the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialization purposes.

The form of distance education at the McGill's Faculty of Education is based upon the complete separation of teacher and learner. (Burpee, Wilson, 1990). Most of our students are too far away for them ever to come together in learning groups. Faculty departments have the responsibility for planning and preparing learning materials, and for grading student assignments and examinations. The distance education program has the function of providing overall planning, coordination, registration, tutor training and monitoring of courses. The courses themselves rely on a pragmatic mixture of technical media both to unite the teacher and student and provide instruction. The applications of electronic mail, fax and telephone to stimulate and enhance regular two-way communication

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is the subject of current research. For reasons of practicality, no learning groups that meet under the direction of a tutor have been formed.

Distance education in Canada

Nearly every Canadian university has distance education as an integral part of its continuing education or extension department. The history of such programs in Canada dates back to 1889 when Queen's University began to offer credit Arts and Science courses by correspondence. (Rothe,1986). Memorial University, Saint Mary's, Waterloo, Laurentian, Brandon, the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University are but a few institutions offering distance education programs today. Two universities which are uniquely distance institutions are Téléuniversité and Athabaska University. Ontario, British Columbia, and the Atlantic Provinces each have coordinating distance education councils. In all cases, university distance education programs are intended to extend educational opportunity to those who for any reason cannot continue their studies at regular institutions of higher learning. At McGill, however, distance education has only recently been considered as an alternative to off-campus courses and at the present time, Education is the sole faculty at the university to offer distance education courses.

Origins of the McGill distance program

McGill's distance education program was initiated to counter problems of university access for teachers in remote areas. School authorities rely upon the university for part or all of the accredited in-service training provided for their teachers. Teaching is a changing field and many teachers feel the need to enhance their knowledge of recent pedagogical developments. While some teachers wish to improve their professional qualifications, others may wish to transfer from one field to another. Later in their professional careers, some teachers may come to need training in school administration. After fifteen years of a major decline in school population throughout English-speaking Quebec, however, the pool of teachers attracted to further professional training has been greatly reduced. This falling-off in numbers has now lowered the demand for off-campus courses to levels which the university can no longer afford. This means that teachers located beyond reasonable commuting distance or remote parts of the province are increasingly disadvantaged in terms of access to university resources.

The beginnings of the distance education program at the Faculty of Education were completely accidental. A chance telephone enquiry by a Baffin Island school media specialist led to an initial trial with five teachers in the winter of 1986. The trial was not elaborate. The northern group was added to a Faculty class in Authoring Languages, an educational computing course, and the combined class was taught as one. Since the distance learners clearly could not attend lectures, they worked from comprehensive study kits which included computer software and manuals on loan, a textbook and a specially designed study guide. Northern mail service is unreliable, and as their schools already made use of commercially available electronic mail for administrative purposes, it was proposed from the start that the distance learners would use this existing service to maintain regular contact with the course instructor. The electronic mail connection enabled them to send regular reports directly to the university and to receive constructive comments as a form of written conversation from the instructor. Electronic mail became the vehicle for encouragement and constructive feedback needed by students for subsequent assignments.

Due to unexpected commitments at their school, two of the five distance learners were unable to finish. Despite this set-back, the trial was judged a success. Not only did the three remaining students complete the course together with the regular Faculty class but their assignments were of an excellent standard. The commitment and motivation of this

group of learners which became apparent at an early stage, provided much of the incentive for planning future courses.

One reason for the initial success, and a program hallmark which survives today is the affordability of the trial for students as well as for department budgets. Two northern school principals, for example, allowed these students to use administrative electronic mail services as communications support for the course. The Department of Educational Psychology was fortunately in a position to prepare a study guide with only minimal editing for the distance learner, and a textbook and support reference material were already available. A simple set of slides with audio commentary illustrating the basic principles of screen design were the only instructional materials developed especially for the course. (Burpee, 1989; Burpee and Wilson, 1989).

In the following years, plans were made to adapt several educational computing and media courses for distance education. The computing courses introduced practical skills in word processing, data bases, and spreadsheets. The educational media course represented the first major venture in preparing specific instructional material for the distance learner. Appreciating from the outset that learners would need visual demonstrations of materials production and equipment operation, the tutor and Media Centre staff produced six hours of instructional videotapes for the course.

Distance Education Registrations, 1987 - 1991

Year	1987-88	1988-89	1989-90	1990-91
Course developers and tutors	7	7	11	20
Number of course sections	6	10	21	30
Registrations	84	70	176	320

Between 1986 and 1991, enrolment grew from five students in the first trial to 320 for the current year. During these years, the geographical area served has grown from the Northwest Territories and northern Quebec to include all of Quebec, the Northwest Territories, the Yukon, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, parts of Newfoundland and Labrador. Some students are also located in Ontario and the Prairies, even though no information has yet been sent to these or the remaining provinces.

By the end of the third year, teacher response could be broken down into almost equal thirds from northern Canada, southern Quebec, and the Montreal region respectively. Registrations, which have doubled for each of the past two years (see table below), now comprise just under one-fifth of all Faculty Continuing Education registrations in undergraduate courses for Fall 1990. This trend will continue to change as new courses are developed and new schools added annually to the mailing list. Consistent but cautious growth is the desired objective since too great an increase will clearly overwhelm a small staff. On the other hand, the university expects proof of teacher interest in the form of a significant increase in the number of course registrations to justify the form of administrative infra-structure requisite for a distance program. In all, the McGill program has served over 500 students, almost all of them teachers, from more than 150 Canadian cities, towns and villages.

The working model at McGill for the division of responsibility for planning and preparing learning materials and for program administration is taken from the University of Waterloo (Sweet, 1986). Waterloo makes a clear distinction between the academic responsibilities assumed by departments which assure a high standard of course content and materials, and the administrative responsibilities assumed by distance education which assure a smooth functioning of the program.

Distance courses developed by departments between 1986 & 1991

Administration and Policy Studies	
Quebec Education	Introduction to Quebec Education
Curriculum and Instruction	
The Teaching of Reading	Reading Instruction (elementary school) The Teacher as Researcher
The Teaching of Writing	Effective Written Communication
Business Education	Introduction to dBASE III+ (MS-DOS) Methods of Teaching Accounting (MS-DOS, Macintosh)
Educational Psychology and Counselling	
Educational Computing	Applications Software I (Apple II, MS-DOS, Macintosh) Applications Software II (Apple II, MS-DOS) Introduction to Logo (Apple II, MS-DOS) Graphic Design I (Macintosh) Animation & Graphics (Macintosh)
Educational Media	Educational Media I Instructional Design
Special Education	Learning and Behavioural Problems in Children

The contribution of Faculty departments is obviously important since it is only through Faculty members' active participation that universities can be certain of the quality of instruction taking place in distance programs. Students, employers and other universities which receive requests for transfer credits also require reliable assurances that learning at a distance carries the same weight as any comparable course studied at the university. How is this possible ? At the University of Waterloo, departments prescribe course content, select course textbooks and are involved in the planning and development of other instructional materials.They also set and grade course examinations. Even the lectures at Waterloo are specially recorded on audiotapes for distance learners by academic staff, rather than by professional script writers or readers. Although methods of teaching and learning may differ, it is clear that through this level of departmental control, universities can reasonably expect distance students will attain the same academic and professional standards of learning as their campus counterparts.

Communicating with the Distance Learner

As more instructors from the Educational Technology program became involved in a growing distance program, their lack of familiarity with the nature and requirements of distance education became increasingly apparent. As tutors, they would need specialized training and support for a new kind of instructional role. Their previous experience had been based on direct classroom interaction in which the instructor could respond to and influence the mood of a class, speak informally, and sense difficulties as they occur. Differences in content, style and points of emphasis were normal, especially from one year to the next, and from one instructor to another. In contrast, distance tutors* had now to adapt to more indirect methods of communicating with students. Visits to the established distance education institutions such as Waterloo (Haag, 1990) and the Open University in

* Distance education programs use the preferred term, "tutor," to describe the academic staff who are the interface between the student and the university.

Britain (1988) showed that how universities could respond to this need by producing extensive guides for their tutors and by establishing monitoring procedures for correspondence between learners and tutors.

The relationship between tutor and distance learner is unique and often creates a perception in the learner's mind of being very special (McInnis-Rankin and Brindley, 1986). As in other distance programs, McGill's tutors establish this relationship through an initial telephone call and then foster it through weekly reporting and assignments. Students find this method works well with electronic mail and fax as it does when they report regularly by telephone. Many who rely upon electronic communications will remark upon the ease of securing help from their tutor when they need assistance. In their experience, reaching the tutor is often much easier than during their university studies when they were dependent upon the convenience of a professor's office hours and available free time.

In response to calls for help and in commenting upon assignments, the tutor has an opportunity to send considered and individual written replies with remarkable transmission speed. There is, however, a time interval within which a reply should be expected or the message loses relevance. Undue delay in tutor response time becomes a cause for student frustration. Expectations are that fast message delivery implies receiving an equally quick answer. Written messages are generally more demanding and formal in their composition than oral replies in the classroom (Holmberg, 1989a). The act of writing with a word processor for electronic mail or fax messages adds an additional time factor to the answering process. Replies cannot be as readily re-stated, expanded or clarified when the tutor's intended answer either remains obscure to the learner or raises fresh concerns. Because the tutor cannot go by facial reaction or detect hesitation in a student's manner, other methods for questioning the student must be employed to detect any misunderstanding of a concept.

Distance programs commonly adapt uniform instructional materials and teaching methods. The action of systematically planning and producing course materials is costly and normally reduces the possibility of individual differences in teaching style. Study guides and other instructional materials such as slide sets, audio-tapes and videotapes are not readily modified, and therefore are likely to remain in place for several years.

Designing effective learning materials for distance courses is an important function of the program. Learning materials are not identical in every respect to those received by the Faculty student, nor is it desirable that they should be. The recorded lectures made by Waterloo academics are purpose-made for distance learners rather than recorded in the classroom. Their content is tight and free of extraneous comment. The modern distance education study guide is carefully planned to produce an inviting, readable text, with good page design and typography, and employs a conversational style based on principles of effective communication (Holmberg, 1989b). The study guide is the intermediary between the student and formal course content. It serves not only to point the way ahead, but to do so in a manner which provokes the intellect, relates theoretical content to real life and suggests answers to problems which the student might encounter. It also provides guidelines for further reading and study, and sets out the assignments that must be completed. The planning, writing and production of effective study guides in distance education are such important processes that larger programs employ specialists to advise and support academics who have the responsibility for preparing them (Seaborne and Zuckerman, 1986). Evaluation of course materials, student progress, and tutor success are major concerns in distance education. They are the subject of a recent publication from the Open University (Thorpe, 1988).

Potential for Growth and Research

From our experience with distance education to date, we are able to confirm Holmberg's viewpoint that the use of telecommunications can greatly speed up course completion time, thus gaining an important advantage for the university (Holmberg, 1989c). Studies show that many distance courses ordinarily run for anywhere from eight months to two years. In some cases, learners may be allowed to work entirely at their own self-determined rate of progress. Some other distance institutions have elaborate tracking systems for their thousands of distance students, who not only begin at any time but often progress at different rates. In the McGill distance program, however, the time to complete a course normally approximates that required for conventional university courses, ie. within 13 to 14 weeks. This is possible because learners can generally submit and receive comments on their assignments within almost the same time-frame as students at the Faculty.

Besides faster course completion, the advantage of the immediacy inherent in electronic mail and fax, even of rapid postal services, should provoke tutors to pursue a form of individual questioning. This has led to a growing awareness of the need for researching techniques in distance education communication skills for these media of instruction at the university. This research can be expected to find immediate application in establishing new guide-lines for tutor training.

As one might expect, shifts in emphasis continue as the program grows. We initially perceived the distance education program as a practical way to help teachers in northern Canada learn about educational computing. Since their available options for further study were extremely limited, distance education provided teachers in remote areas with an alternative way to improve their professional qualifications. This led to establishing a more substantial program. The original narrow base is now being rapidly expanded through the participation of other departments at the Faculty. Many more courses, such as in Business Education, Special Education, English as a Second Language, the teaching of Reading, and Effective Written Communication are now available at a distance or are in the planning stages .The evidence that the program is appreciated by teachers in eastern Canada can now be seen through rising registration numbers. As new courses continue to be added, McGill's distance education program can be expected to gain in strength and thus establish its own distinct identity within Continuing Education. A new kind of administrative structure can be expected, geared to the specific requirements of distance education. Modest funding, currently piecemeal from Continuing Education, departmental and external donors, has meant developing the new program on a minimal budget. As it proves itself, the program should expect to find a place in the Faculty budget as well as to attract funds from the next McGill Advancement Plan. With this support in place, the Faculty's new program will provide a model for the development of distance education elsewhere in the university and will allow McGill to take its place with the other Canadian universities which support distance learning.

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